

Tree Bark

by Sally Cureton

There isn't much to see in the woods this time of year, but the bark on all the trees can easily be seen and sometimes can be the most interesting part of the tree. Bark is the layer of the tree trunk that protects the tree from insects, fungi, animals, physical injury, water loss and diseases. Many trees have been known to survive forest fires due to the protection their bark gave them. It starts during the tree's first year of growth with an additional layer added each year. Some trees will shed their bark regularly, but most of them will have several years' growth at any time. These accumulated layers can become quite thick. As the tree ages, its bark will form textures which are relatively uniform for each species. These various textures have been divided into at least 18 types, making a great visual tool for tree identification.

The cork that comes in our wine bottles is from the bark of a species of oak tree, the cork oak. Its bark will accumulate to a depth of several inches, so that sections can be removed without harming the tree. This cork will be stripped from each tree several times. The product of the original stripping is considered to be of a low grade. The cork that is harvested later on that has replaced the original layer is generally of a higher quality and can be harvested about every 10 years.

Another interesting thing to be seen in a tree's bark is a burl. Ever seen those big knots on the trunk of a tree? That's a burl. These growths will range from the size of a fist to a big tub. Generally they are dark and furrowed and seem to grow in response to some sort of foreign invasion of the tree. No one knows the exact reason. Burls don't seem to harm the tree which will continue to grow as steadily as its neighbors. The wood in these burls frequently has a wavy pattern which has inspired many woodworkers to take a large one and make a bowl out of it.

One of the most dangerous things the bark of a tree can face is the blades of a lawn mower. The area that is usually injured is the root buttress that flares out from the trunk along the ground which gets in the path of the mower. Large wounds are particularly serious, but repeated small wounds can also add up to trouble. Once the bark has been damaged, infection can (and frequently does) invade the tree. These kinds of wounds have been known to have been the initial cause of a tree's eventual death. Experts suggest always trimming around the base of any tree by hand. Another solution commonly seen is a wide area of mulch around the tree preventing the mower from getting close enough to do any damage. All of our plants need our care and attention from the small to the large.

